

CHAPTER TEN

USING A SOLUTION-BUILDING APPROACH IN CAREER COUNSELLING

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In this chapter, I describe the key principles of solution-focused counselling, and provide practical examples of its application to career counselling, solution-building career counselling. I will also discuss challenges for career counsellors who adopt this way of working with clients.

WHAT IS SOLUTION-FOCUSED COUNSELLING?

Solution-focused therapy was pioneered in the 1980s by the psychologist Steve de Shazer, counsellor Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues at the Milwaukee Brief Family Therapy Center. Steve de Shazer's early writings were, apparently, influenced by hypnotherapist Milton Erickson's approach to psychotherapy (de Jong & Berg, 2002). Most accounts, however, indicate that the greatest influence on the development of a solution-focused way of working was the discovery made by the Milwaukee team when they observed counselling sessions and reflected upon what was most helpful to clients (de Jong & Berg, 2002). They noticed that even clients who presented with what they described as multiple problems could describe times when the problem was either less severe or absent. Further, when

clients were encouraged to notice things that they were already doing during these times, they went on to make positive changes. From these discoveries, the Milwaukee team began to develop, and critically analyse, the use of techniques that focused on client change, client competence and client goals that were based on principles of collaboration and social construction.

A number of counsellors, researchers, coaches and teachers have welcomed the solution-focused approach and adopted the principles underlying this way of counselling. They have taken notice of what works best for their clients and adapted techniques in order to be most helpful to each of their clients. Since they are guided by the assumption that all clients seek positive change, the main focus in their work is to help clients clarify and express what it is they want, and discover and expand on what they are already doing to reach their objectives. Adaptations have included solution-focused work that incorporates different interpretations based on hypnosis, (Dolan, 2000), narrative therapy (O'Hanlon & Beadle, 1996), Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Te Ruru, 1998), motivational interviewing (Lewis & Osborn, 2004), systems theory approach (McMahon & Patton, 2000; Miller 2004a), and person-centred therapy (O'Connell, 1998). All of these approaches stand in opposition to therapies influenced by the medical model where the therapist is regarded as the expert who diagnoses problems and prescribes treatments.

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IN WHAT WAYS IS SOLUTION-FOCUSED COUNSELLING CONSTRUCTIVIST?

There are two main premises underlying constructivist approaches. The first is that individuals create their own reality based on their understanding of, and participation in, their own experiences (Brown & Brooks, 1996). The second premise is that the client's whole environment, and the interactions within it, influence behaviour. The solution-focused approach encompasses both premises. Solution-focused counselling is constructivist in that counsellors encourage clients to describe, reflect upon, make meaning about and interpret things that are important to them. Counsellors also invite clients to construct personally meaningful goals based on positive images of their own competence, achievements, resources, strengths and successes. The collaborative nature of the approach frees the counsellor from taking the burden of responsibility for the client's counselling outcomes and enhances the client's sense of self-helpfulness.

Since meanings are constructed and re-affirmed in social interactions (Blumer, 1969), a solution building career counsellor recognises that every interaction has the potential to influence change. The counsellor therefore relies on therapeutic conversations to help the client shape and determine what kind of life the client wants, what the client is already good at, where desired change is already occurring and what will encourage further change (de Jong & Berg, 2002). The most important aspect of these conversations is that they are led by the "reality" of

the client and the recognition that this reality is influenced not only by the interaction between the client and counsellor but also by the interactions clients have with themselves (see Blumer, 1969). Such conversations therefore involve the whole client (family, culture, society and relationships) and are grounded in the day-to-day activities and experiences of the client. The foundation of the solution-building model is the counsellor's unwavering confidence in the client's ability to make (construct) positive changes in his or her life by accessing and using inner resources and strengths (Miller, 1998). Important then, is the counsellor's ability to demonstrate his or her belief in, and hope for, the client's ability to change.

PRINCIPLES OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED COUNSELLING APPLIED TO SOLUTION-BUILDING CAREER COUNSELLING

Gale Miller (1998) regarded solution-focused brief therapy as radically new because it is based on different assumptions about social reality, new practical concerns about the therapeutic process and new strategies for helping clients to change their lives. These same comments can be made about solution-building career counselling.

Guiding Principles

- Change is inevitable and conversations are transformative.

- Clients have within themselves the capacity to consider new or different meanings, construct solution-focused realities and generate intrinsic motivation to change.
- When clients experience themselves as competent, they are more able to make positive changes (Durrant, 1995).
- When clients are able to express what they want, they can discover and expand on things they are already doing to get there.
- Rather than find a solution that fits the problem, counsellors need to help clients find the solution that fits them (O'Connell, 1998).
- If what clients are already doing is working, counsellors encourage them to keep doing that.
- If what clients are doing is not working, counsellors encourage them to do something different.

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An essential element of solution-focused counselling is the paradigmatic shift in thinking, by client and counsellor, away from problems, (what is going wrong) and toward possibilities and hope (what is wanted) (Friedman & Fanger, 1991). In keeping with this view, solution-building career counsellors consider that it is easier to help clients construct positive achievable goals and solutions than to dissolve concerns. Since many career clients expect counselling to involve talking about their interests, hopes and goals, it is relatively easy to elicit examples of client strengths and competences so that the counsellor and the client can gradually build an image of the client's career and preferred future. Thus, in

solution-building career counselling, less time is spent on exploring the developmental career history of the client, or making interpretive statements, and more is spent on exploring a positive career goal and extending those times when progress toward achieving the career goal was made. The distinctive feature of solution-building career counselling is to help clients build their own life plans rather than fitting their characteristics and traits into a career profile.

Similar to other constructivist approaches, the solution-focused approach acknowledges the power of language to influence interactions, meanings and actions. Solution-building career counsellors therefore adopt a stance of curiosity, and ask many positively-focused questions to demonstrate their respect for the client's resourcefulness and competence to succeed. Such questions enable the client to make sense of their current situation, recognise possible choices and envisage a preferred future (goal) through their answers to themselves. While questions help clients articulate their meaningful experiences, it behoves a solution-building career counsellor to listen carefully to responses for key phrases which, when amplified, help clients experience their own solution-building resources.

USING SOLUTION-BUILDING CAREER COUNSELLING TECHNIQUES

Overview of process

In solution-building career counselling, the counsellor uses many of the skills that are basic to all counselling but with a different focus. These include: selective listening (for client responses that show optimism, demonstrate client self-determination, competence, self efficacy), speaking (with an emphasis on reinforcing evidence of client competence and on conveying hopefulness that the client will succeed), questioning (with an emphasis on meaning-making and solution-seeking) and respecting silence (providing time for the client to make sense of what is being created). Within a solution-building career counselling session, therefore, counsellors aim to

- help clients clarify their reason for coming to counselling in terms of the preferred future that they want (goal setting questions);
- identify and amplify aspects of their lives that are working well (exception questions);
- re-discover important aspects of their context including resources, successes, and strengths (self-helpfulness questions);
- clarify and envisage how life would be different if the problem were suddenly solved (miracle questions); and
- assess progress towards their goals (scaling questions).

Finally, the solution-building career counsellor can assist clients to connect past competencies with future goals by constructing a feedback message that will encourage success and self-helpfulness.

Solution-building questions

When practitioners first look at techniques used by solution-focused counsellors they are often deceived into thinking that mastery will only require learning a list of questions. Indeed, solution-focused counsellors do appear to ask a great number of questions. These are, however, questions with a particular focus; a focus to change the counselling interaction from being problem-saturated to being solution-oriented. Solution-building counsellors therefore adopt a stance of “not knowing” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1991) to enable clients to learn more about themselves and to create their own meaningful goals and solutions. Examples of questions include those that begin with; “I’m curious about...” or “I’m just wondering how you managed that?” Second, since counsellors recognise that each interaction influences the client’s sense of reality, they ask questions that anticipate client resourcefulness and competence to encourage client self-competence and self-helpfulness. Examples of such questions include “how did you realise that?” or “what do you know about yourself that will help you decide that?” Third, questions are often posed to help clients become aware of new distinctions (exceptions to their stuckness or their single view of their problem). Solution-building career counsellors formulate these questions because they know that solutions emerge from client recognition of even the smallest experiences of difference. Examples of such questions include “so is that new for you?” or “and how is that different?”

While questions that anticipate positive responses are important to solution-building career counsellors, to be effective, career counsellors need to be confident that they can also work with their clients' responses. The questions are part of the interaction, but paramount is the ability of the counsellor to hear or see within the client's responses details of exceptions, resources, strengths and successes. When these are amplified for the client, both counsellor and client can co-construct possible steps toward achieving client-defined goals.

Using prompts

When career counsellors are learning solution-building ways of working, it helps to use some process and language prompts as a guide. Such prompts include:

1. Clarify the problem by asking about goals (see scales later in this chapter)
2. Build up positive exceptions that are alternatives to the problem by asking questions that include "instead" or "suppose".
3. Encourage hope by asking questions about what, where, who and how NOT why? Also presuppose success by asking "when" NOT "if"?
4. Encourage self-helpfulness by asking questions that include "how will you know?"
5. Encourage planfulness by constructing meaningful homework based on client-expressed goals, successes and resources.

Clarifying client-defined goals

Solution-building career counsellors often commence a counselling session with a question that helps the client articulate their goal. Such questions include “What would you like to get out of this counselling session?” or, to encourage a sense of client competence “what will tell you that coming here today was a good idea?” If a client responds to such questions with problem-talk, the counsellor respectfully acknowledges their difficulty and asks another goal-setting question. An example would be “given that [this issue] is what has brought you here, how will you know that you have changed it for the better” or “what will you be doing differently when it is not a problem anymore?” Paramount here is the ability of the solution-building career counsellor to ensure that the client’s goals are self identified and are expressed in terms of the presence of something rather than its absence.

Envisioning a preferred future

One solution-focused technique that is used to great effect in personal counselling is the so-called miracle question (de Jong & Berg, 2002). This is, in effect, a series of statements that encourage the client to imagine what they would be doing, and what other people would notice them doing if the concern that brought them to counselling no longer existed. Responses to the miracle question can elicit small details from which counsellor and client can construct client goals, or

exceptions to their problems. Either will provide the building blocks for solution-building.

In solution-building career counselling, the miracle question can take a slightly different form, one in which the counsellor sets the context for clients to imagine how they would like things to be in (say) five years. Important here is both the pace and the language used to help the client experience such a future. Statements that start with “suppose you were talking to me in five year’s time..” or “let’s pretend that we were able to turn the clock forward a few years...and your career was developing well...what would tell you that you were on track?” Responses to such questions help clients articulate their hopes for a particular quality of life and provide the counsellor with clues about client career goals. If the client responded by saying “I would be making reasonable money and I would feel valued” the counsellor hears the beginning of a career goal. The counsellor’s role at this point is to help the client elaborate the detail of such a goal by asking questions that presuppose such a future is probable such as “and *when* you feel valued, what are you doing?” or “and *when* you are making reasonable money, what do your friends notice about you?” or checking that the statements are client goals by asking, “and would you find it useful for us to explore possible careers like that?”

A further example of using the client’s vision of a preferred future is described by George, Iveson and Ratner (2004). Here clients are encouraged to rehearse a difficult event from the standpoint of its successful, but still future, completion.

This could be used effectively with a client who is anxious about an impending job interview. The counsellor might say “let’s imagine that the job interview has just finished and you are getting up to leave. You are anxious, of course, because you don’t know whether or not you have got the job, but you know that you have presented yourself really well in the interview. You feel very pleased with the way you presented yourself and you are remembering how you did it. What would you be remembering about how you were in the interview when you got outside the interview room?” A client’s answer to this question can be heard, elaborated on and extended by the counsellor asking “what else?” often, and perhaps asking how the person conducting the job interview might describe the client in the interview or asking what the client was thinking and saying during the interview. Each of the client’s answers has within it some clues to the solution to the client’s concern about not presenting well at an interview.

Focusing on exceptions and progress

Each of the above future-oriented techniques allows clients to build up pictures of their own competencies with respect to their goals. The counsellor’s role is to help them see themselves clearly and identify useful resources they can use to help themselves move towards achieving their career goals. There are a number of practical techniques that the counsellor may use to assist this process. One is adapted from the empty chair technique often used within a Gestalt therapy session (Zinker, 1977). A solution-building career counsellor may use an outcome

chair and assign it the name of the client's goal. The client can be invited to sit in the chair and then asked "from that outcome chair, what advice would you give yourself right now?"..."what else?"

A second practical technique is the use of questions relating to a scale that helps clients shift their perception from a problem focus to a goal focus.

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Essentially scales provide clients with clear images through which they can self-assess their own situations in terms of progress, seriousness, determination and hopefulness. When clients and counsellors are clarifying client goals, a scale can be drawn to help determine where clients want to be and where they are now relative to that goal. Solution-building questions help clients identify what needs to happen to help them move along the scale. The parameters of a scale are described in Figure 10.1.

Insert Figure 10.1 about here

This scale can take on a number of different formats. One format that encourages collaboration incorporates ideas from Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory by inviting clients to name the two end points of a scale. Suppose, for instance, in response to the initial goal-seeking question "what would you like to get out of this session?" the client responded "I'd like to feel confident that what I am studying will get me a good job". The counsellor could suggest a scale to help the client make the goal more concrete. The counsellor might say "if I was to map

your confidence on a scale where 10 depicts where you hope you can be and 1 depicts the opposite of that, what would you call those two points?” The client might describe a scale where 1 was “scared I’m taking the wrong subjects” and 10 was “doing well in my subjects will give me many options”. Alternatively the client might describe a scale where “1” was “confused/stuck” and “10” was “clear about what to do”.

Scaling questions are extremely useful to clients and maximum impact can be gained when the scale, and client descriptors are drawn, preferably on a whiteboard or large piece of paper. In the previous case, the counsellor might draw the second scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
stuck/confused							Clear about what to do		

Exposure to this scale, allows clients to observe, consider and assess all the nuances in their own scale. Once the scale is drawn, sensitive questioning on the part of the counsellor can help clients describe themselves at different points on the scale. The counsellor might ask clients to draw on the scale, “where would you have put yourself on this scale before you made the appointment to come here?” and, “the point on the scale that you would rather be” (goal clarification)?

Suppose in the previous case, the client indicates that a “3” describes her situation now, a “2” describes where she was before the counselling session and an “8” describes her preferred future. The client and/or counsellor would record the three points the scale:

1	[2]	(3)	4	5	6	7	{8}	9	10
stuck/confused							Clear about what to do		

Each of these points will be meaningful to the client and, to help her explore this meaning, the counsellor remains curious and asks the client to describe what she is (or would be) doing at each of these points. Questions that aid this process include:

“What words would you use to describe that point on the scale?”(self-assessment)

“What words describe what you would be doing differently at that point?”
(self-helpfulness)

“What would others say was different for you then?” (contextual meaning).

This client may use phrases such as, “I feel like I’m wasting my time” and, “I can’t concentrate on anything” to extend her meaning for a “2”. Further, she may add, “I want to check things out” to these descriptors to explain her difference at a “3” and she may use terms such as, “I would be confident in my course of study” and, “I would know where my qualification would lead” and “I would have a plan” to describe her “8”. The scale could be built upon as follows:

1	[2]	(3)	4	5	6	7	{8}	9	10
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Stuck/confused		Clear about what to do
[2]	(3)	{8}
Wasting time	check things	confident
Unable to concentrate		have a plan
		know where
		qualifications lead

When descriptors are written on the scale, those written below the preferred future are very important in the solution-building career process. The counsellor can use these in a number of ways. First, the counsellor may ask exception-building questions such as “has there been a time, recently that you have felt just a little more confident about your course of study?” If the client is able to remember such a time, the counsellor asks questions that help the client acknowledge her own role in developing or maintaining confidence, “so, what was it that you were doing that made that possible?”

Another useful aspect of the counsellor and client reading the whole scale is that the counsellor can ask questions that encourage the client to recognise her agency in moving towards her self-identified goal. When the counsellor asks the client how she has managed to move from a 2 to a 3 the client’s responses provides solution-building clues. Thus, if the client says I decided to come to counselling – the counsellor can write that on the board, immediately above the scale, and ask how the client expected counselling would help her move towards her goal. Say

the client said I wouldn't have to shoulder this on my own the counsellor would help the client rephrase the statement in positive terms "I would look for support" and write that on the board. These statements provide what I like to call the parachute for the client who is feeling "stuck"; a list of successful strategies from which solutions may be built. The client can look at the list and see that she is already doing things (seeking support, looking at the internet, asking friends) that can help her move "up the scale". The counsellor might prompt this view by asking "So which of these 'successful strategies' would be useful for you to move from a three to a four?" Such questions enable the client to break the goal into manageable pieces and to believe that their achievement is possible.

While the above examples describe a scale using 10 numerical points, it is just as effective to use other formats that incorporate images, steps or non-numeric text if these are more meaningful to the client. Consider, for example, how helpful it would be to some clients if they could be invited to examine past and present contextual influences and the possible effect of such influences as lifestyle and employment trends on their preferred future. The solution-building career counsellor can easily encourage this process by encouraging clients to use a systems theory framework such as that described by Patton and McMahon (1999) to explore and evaluate their own systems of influence on their career goals.

Suppose a client described himself as reserved, with an interest in photography and travel, and also as being good at maths and music and hoping for a career that would be exciting. He and his counsellor may draw the following simplified

diagram using colour, capital letters and size of circles to describe the importance of particular aspects.

Insert Figure 10.2 about here

Once such a diagram was drawn, it can be used in much the same way as the points on a scale. It is easy for the counsellor to be curious about whether or not the client is happy with the appearance of the diagram, how it has looked at other times, ways the client would like to change particular influences and what it would take to make such changes. (For other examples of the use of systems models, see Miller, 2004a). (changed paragraph to double space)

Constructing meaningful feedback

In solution-focused counselling, there is an assumption that clients will work towards achieving their goals outside the counselling session. To help focus this work, counsellors finish counselling sessions with a formal procedure. First, they take a short break, preferably away from the room in which they are working, to quickly review things that the client has said during the interview. During the break, career clients can look through some relevant career information and counsellors consider three parts of their feedback: compliments, a bridge (or rationale), and usually a task.

All help convey to clients that the counsellor has listened, acknowledged their problem, heard what they want to be different and agrees with steps they might take to achieve their goals. In order to compliment clients, counsellors need to recall and write down client strengths and successes. General, illustrative examples might include: making the decision to do something, coming to counselling, recognising that relaxation helps make decisions easier, being clear about wanting a career that uses particular skills and training, working hard during the counselling session.

In order to formulate a task, counsellors should look at times, during the interview that clients recognised their own self-helpfulness, resourcefulness and hope that success would occur. The task itself can extend strategies, such as searching the internet, that clients are already using to move up the scale. If a task is perceived as logical, reasonable and relevant, it is more likely to be considered to be achievable. To ensure this, the counsellor links the task's relevance to the client's goal or exceptions. The suggested task is, therefore shaped with phrases such as: "because you have said that you want..." and, "since you have indicated that...". Exemplars of feedback messages can be found in Miller (2004a & 2004b).

CHALLENGES FOR CAREER COUNSELLORS USING SOLUTION-BUILDING IN THEIR PRACTICE

While I have just described a number of generic skills, it is inappropriate to reduce solution-building career counselling to simple, formulaic techniques. In solution-building, it is the uniqueness of clients that determines counsellors' questions, the alliance between clients and counsellors that allows this uniqueness to flourish, and counsellors' faith in clients' ability to reach self-identified goals that encourages clients' belief that they will make progress. The challenge for career practitioners is to respect that many clients come to them expecting a service related to identity, training and/or employment yet be able to delay their use of trait and factor approaches, adopt a stance of "not knowing" and recognise clients as experts in their own lives.

One way to achieve this balance is to engage the client's interest in co-construction at the outset, by explaining the rationale of solution-building. When there is sufficient time between appointment making and an interview, the solution-building career counsellor may include a rationale statement in an introductory letter. Such a statement makes it possible to include a pre-supposition question to encourage self-helpfulness: "in preparation for our interview, consider what you want, and what you are already doing to help yourself achieve this". When there is no time for a letter counsellors can include in their introductory statement comment on the fact that when the client and counsellor work together to clarify the client's goals and discover client resources for achieving these goals, the counselling outcome is better than when the counsellor anticipates the goals and resources *for* the client.

This does not mean that career practitioners are expected to withhold information from the clients. Rather, it means that they delay producing such information until they have helped the client explore their needs, aspirations, strengths and skills first. The challenge is to restrain from offering information from the standpoint of the expert and to encourage client self-responsibility, by offering all suggestions and information tentatively. Questions at this stage might include “I wonder how this fits with your goal” or “I wonder if you are aware...”

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Finally, adopting a solution-building approach does not mean discarding inventories and other assessment tools, rather, it means using them differently. Qualitative tools such as card-sorts, timelines and life-maps encourage clients to use their own language to self-reflect about vocational self-concepts and work roles and consider their own career themes. Such assessment tools can be used very effectively alongside scaling questions to help clients clarify goals or estimate progress towards achieving their preferred career future. Brainstorming can be used to help clients identify values and talents or clarify past successes that might give them clues about how to address current and future career quandaries. A solution-building career counsellor will use focused listening with each conversation to identify and amplify for clients those occasions that demonstrate client successes that may help clients move toward their chosen goal.

CONCLUSION

When Sexton, Whiston, Bleuer, and Walz (1997) surveyed counselling outcome research, they concluded that clients preferred career counselling to last about three sessions, focus on specific career plans and decision-making and provide them with a clearer sense of direction. Effective solution-building career counselling is brief, it focuses on clients' plans and it encourages them to leave the session with a clear sense of how to move towards achieving their goals.

My motivation for writing the chapter comes from my enthusiasm to encourage career practitioners to use solution-focused assumptions and techniques in their work. Further, I hope that when career practitioners adopt solution-building approaches in their work, they will generate the evidence that is so desperately needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of working this way in career practice. While I have only touched on some of the ways that solution-building procedures can be incorporated into the work of career-practitioners I anticipate that readers will begin to find further exemplars.

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